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War Without Politics: A Critique of Clausewitz

Core Course 5602 Essay

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Perhaps no aspect of Carl von Clausewitz's classic work *On War* has more continuing relevance for strategists than his assertion that war "is an act of policy" and further that "war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means."¹ It is significant that to the modern strategist this dictum has become axiomatic. It is a tribute to Clausewitz's considerable intellect that this insight has survived 75 years of the most rapid and revolutionary political, economic, social, and technological change in human history. In fact, it is safe to say that this Clausewitzian observation is more broadly accepted today by both military leaders as well as their civilian masters than it was when written (or for the first century afterwards for that matter).

Given the near universal acceptance of this axiom in Western strategic thought it is interesting that the noted British military historian, John Keegan, should write at the very beginning of his recent work, *A History of Warfare*, "War is not the continuation of policy by other means. The world would be a simpler place to understand if this dictum of Clausewitz's were true."² Or as Martin Van Creveld asserts in his introduction to one of his recent works, *The Transformation of War*, "Contemporary "strategic"

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* ed. and trans Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 87.

² John Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 3.

thought is rooted in a "Clausewitzian" world picture that is either obsolete or wrong."³ What is going on here? Has something changed? The purpose of this essay will be to briefly examine the current relevance of the Clausewitzian assertion of the relationship between war and policy and its continuing applicability as we enter the 21st century.

In order to examine the relevance of Clausewitz's observation one must first ask to what extent is war not an extension of policy? To answer this question one must first deal with the question of what causes war. That humankind is prone to violence is historically indisputable. The reasons for this, however, are not so clear. It is likely a complex combination of biological, psychological, cultural, and social factors which drive men to fight. Given that man is by nature a social and gregarious animal, it is not surprising that he would find himself fighting in groups, engaging in group conflict, for any number of reasons.

Must this conflict, this "war", always be political in nature? Clearly not. Clausewitz is wrong when he writes "It is, of course, well known that the only source of war is politics -- the intercourse of governments and peoples" or that "war is only a branch of political activity it is in no sense autonomous."⁴ As Keegan notes, war in many cases may be predominantly cultural in its roots and not political.⁵ It is at the

³ Martin van Creveld. *The Transformation of War*, (New York: The Free Press, 1991), ix.

⁴ Clausewitz, 605

cultural level that Clausewitz's answer to his question, What is war?, is defective.⁵ For example, history is replete with warrior societies for whom conquest, rape, and pillage are ends in themselves. When Genghis Khan said "Man's greatest good fortune is to chase and defeat his enemy, seize his total possessions, leave his married women weeping and wailing, ride his gelding, [and] use the bodies of his women as a nightshirt and support" he was describing a level of war which Clausewitz's theory fails to address.⁶

To go one step further, there exists a level of war which neither Clausewitz's political perspective nor Keegan's cultural perspective accurately captures and that is the behavioral perspective perhaps most directly described by Thomas Hobbes 150 years before Clausewitz. "Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war and such a war, as is of every man, against every man."⁷ In other words war is mankind's natural disposition, not as a result of the existence of political power as Clausewitz would have it, but rather because of the lack of political power to keep this disposition towards war in check. In the modern world one must look no further than conflict in such diverse

⁵ Keegan, 11.

⁶ P. Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 155, quoted in Keegan, 189.

⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1962), 100.

regions as Lebanon, Bosnia, Liberia, Algeria, Somalia, Northern Ireland, or scores of other places in the world to suspect that war is more than a political act. that it lies deeper in man's nature, and that a Hobbesian world of "war of all against all" lies beneath all societies and states, waiting to break out when these institutions cease to be strong enough to control this natural impulse

How then shall we assess the relevance of the Clausewitzian theory of war as a political instrument if it is limited as a comprehensive description of what war is? While its descriptive value is bounded by the criticisms noted above its prescriptive value is perhaps of greater relevance. It is probably not true to Clausewitz's original intent to suggest that he was describing what ought to be rather than what is when he defined war as a political instrument. However it is in this sense that he remains of value to the modern strategist. For to state that war is a political instrument is to suggest that war should be fought only for a political purpose and not as a result of a cultural imperative or behavioral instinct. This implies a self imposed limit to war, a limit imposed by the rationale of policy. In fact politics is the only way in which war can be controlled, much as Thomas Hobbes asserted

In fairness to Clausewitz (despite his writing to the contrary), he probably did instinctively understand that war can be, in its very nature, something more than a political instrument and as such best avoided unless it is controlled by political ends. This is best seen in his discussion of the "paradoxical trinity", which is essentially Clausewitz's analytical model for studying war. The three points of this trinity are (1) "primordial violence, hatred, and enmity", (2) "the play of chance and probability", and (3) the "element of subordination, as an instrument of policy". In order to amplify this

concept as an analytical tool Clausewitz "operationalizes" this trinity by stating "The first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people the second the commander and his army, the third the government" Any theory of war, Clausewitz continues, must address these three points and their relationship to one another⁸ A broader interpretation of Clausewitz could lead to the conclusion that in his recognition of the "primordial violence" inherent in "the people" Clausewitz understood the behavioral and/or cultural roots which may serve as a source of war independent of political aims Thus Clausewitz is perhaps backing away from his assertion that "war springs from some political purpose" which is "the prime cause of [war's] existence"⁹ Perhaps war has other deeper roots as well and that politics is more the means to check or control war, directing it towards a rational end, than it is the source of war

With the above interpretation in mind a better understanding of the distinction between what Clausewitz terms "absolute war" and "real war" becomes possible Clausewitz's theories become more meaningful if we see 'absolute war' as emerging from man's "primordial" nature, uncontrolled and an end in itself, and "real war" as war which has been limited and constrained by politics and directed towards a rational end, not because it necessarily will be but because it ought to be Thus Keegan has it wrong when he writes that Clausewitz argues that "the more nearly [warfare] could approximate 'true war' [or absolute war] the better it served a state's political ends. and

⁸ Clausewitz, 89

⁹ Clausewitz, 87

that any gap remaining between 'true war' and the imperfect form of 'real war' should be recognized simply as the deference that strategy paid to political necessity.¹⁰ On the contrary, Clausewitz consistently argues that war must be limited by politics and absolute war avoided. "War cannot be divorced from political life, and whenever this occurs in our thinking about war, the many links that connect the two elements are destroyed and we are left with something pointless and devoid of sense."¹¹

It is ironic that Keegan should see Clausewitz as the "ideological father of the First World War"¹² (much as did another Englishman, B H Liddell Hart), because of Clausewitz's (alleged) "literary insistence that armies must strive to make real war and 'true war' the same thing."¹³ The conduct of World War One as it evolved could not have been more anti-Clausewitzian, as it took on the character of absolute war, a war without political constraint, a war led by such as Erich von Ludendorff who observed "All theories of Clausewitz have to be thrown overboard. War and politics not only serve the survival of the people, but war is the highest expression of the racial will of life."¹⁴ In other words war is a "cultural" end in itself.

¹⁰ Keegan, 17

¹¹ Clausewitz, 605

¹² Keegan, 22

¹³ Keegan, 19

¹⁴ Erich Ludendorff, *Der Totale Krieg*, (Munich, 1935), 10, quoted in Michael Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914-1945," in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ Princeton University Press , 548

and not a political instrument If anything, World War One proves the point that whereas Clausewitz's theory of war may suffer from weakness as descriptive theory it remains extremely valuable as prescriptive theory War can deviate from political control, indeed its very nature may be devoid of political meaning, but when it does it will be disastrous for a nation

What may we then conclude as to the relevance of this Clausewitzian mode of analysis now and into the future? Firstly, as noted, its chief value is as prescriptive theory War should only be an extension of politics because only politics can prevent war or control it once started Otherwise war will be nourished by deeper non-rational cultural and or behavioral impulses which cause war to be uncontrollable and thus irrational This point is critical for the policy-maker or strategist to always keep foremost in mind It is particularly important for the military strategist, for whom the military logic of war, the goal of compelling "our enemy to do our will" in Clausewitz's terms, will tend to take on a life of its own independent of and deviating from the political object In other words, in seeking to defeat the enemy, the military object inevitably moves conflict toward absolute war Only politics can check this tendency This tension is, of course, at the root of the soldier's natural desire from time immemorial for politicians to stay out of the conduct of war At the strategic level, nothing could be more wrong or more dangerous

It is important to note that in discussing the above point Clausewitz falls short in providing valid descriptive theory

"Were [war] a complete, untrammeled, absolute manifestation of violence (as the pure concept would require), war would of its own independent will usurp the place of policy the moment policy had brought it into being it would then drive policy out of office and

rule by the laws of its own nature This, in fact, is the view that has been taken of the matter whenever some discord between policy and the conduct of war has stimulated theoretical distinctions of this kind *But in reality things are different and this view is thoroughly mistaken* [emphasis added]¹⁵

Unfortunately, history shows that this view is not mistaken, again the First World War being a prime example

Recognizing the weakness of Clausewitzian theory as description offers a valuable frame of reference for strategists confronting current and future conflict For while it is likely the most significant threats to the United States for the foreseeable future will continue to come from nation-states, and hence will be predominantly political at their root, it can be anticipated that not all conflict with which American strategists will be confronted will be "trinitarian war" to use Martin van Creveld's phrase describing Clausewitzean theory¹⁶ "Nontrinitarian war", where an opponent's waging of war may not be controlled by a political object, may prove to be a significant threat to US interests Conflict arising from tribalism, religious sectarianism, crime, Hobbesian anarchy resulting from the breakdown of political authority, or other armed strife where political purpose is absent or subordinate to other impulses is likely to become at least a portion of the strategic problem facing the United States

In fact it already has The conflict in Bosnia is to a large extent "nontrinitarian" in nature However, US political and military strategy seem to treat it as "trinitarian" war, i.e. war in accordance with the Clausewitzean model, a conflict waged with a political

¹⁵ Clausewitz, 87

¹⁶ van Creveld, chap II passim

object and thus ultimately amenable to a political solution One suspects that in the case of Bosnia, the application of U.S. military force to impose a political solution is likely to fail in the long run exactly because this war is, in the first instance, not about politics. Thus the lesson for strategists is that the Clausewitzian model may not apply to your opponent and it should not be imputed to him One thing with which I am certain Clausewitz would agree -- one should know the nature of the conflict one is about to enter before engaging with military force As he himself wrote "The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature."¹⁷

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